

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 1

Those Dancing Feet - WALTER "HAPPY" MACDONALD

HE was born in Canada, and his feet were as restless as Canadian maple leaves in autumn and just as colorful! Walter MacDonald was a born dancer. When he was old enough to hum a tune, his feet punctuated it with a beat all their own.

"The boy has a great talent! He's a natural!" the professional vaudevillians who came through town said. Walter loved them only a little less than he loved the exuberance of letting music tell his body and feet what to do next.

But he knew that he could dance his shoes to shreds in the packing room of the Detroit, Michigan, stationery store in which he found a job when he was in his late teens - unless a big break came along!

In his spare time, he dreamed how somebody would discover him. Then one day a man carrying a big stack of ragged-edged papers strode into the stationery store.

"Help you, sir?" Walter asked?

"Hope you can." He flopped down the stack, and Walter saw that they were theater and press notices. "Keepsakes," the man said, touching one with reverence. "Mean a lot to me. Want to have 'em rebound. Can you do it here?"

Walter nodded, riffling through them in enchantment. This fellow was in The Business. "You're a dancer," Walter said with awe.

The man leaned on the counter and took out a cigar. "Yeah, yeah, kid. I'm a dancer."

Walter's fingers caressed the ragged edges. "You're John McCurchy!"

McCurchy took a big puff on the cigar and beamed. "That ring any bells with you, kid?"

"I'll say it does. I'm a dancer, too." "Yeah?"

Somewhere deep in Walter's mind, he heard a tinny piano swing into a happy song. Rushing out from behind the counter, he caught the beat of the far-off sound. His answering feet carried him across the wooden floor - past the showcase, by the door, down the stretch by the display table.

They danced him back to where McCurchy stood, puffing and grinning. "Hey, boy, keep that up."

"Whatever you say, Mr. McCurchy. You like it? You think I'm good?" The piano was louder and happier, and Walter clogged up toward the front again.

"Like it!" McCurchy chortled. "You're just what I need, boy. You're happy, man. You're happy!"

"I'm what?" His feet held the beat. "You're happy. That's real happy stuff."

Suddenly Walter felt as happy in his heart as he did in his feet. First he grinned, then he laughed out loud. As McCurchy laughed with him, Walter clogged around the display counter twice, to the sound of the far-off piano playing a vaudeville song.

That day two things happened to the teen-age stationery clerk from Canada. He got his big break - and his professional name. Young Walter was "Happy Mac," and according to John McCurchy he was on his way up to the top

At least, Happy Mac was on his way to Texas. "Stay with me, do things my way," McCurchy guaranteed, "and I'll make you a name in The Business inside two years!"

Young Happy wanted nothing more. He was an obedient student. Disciplining his impetuous feet, he painstakingly learned the routines that the Texas audiences liked, always improvising enough to give them his own happy trademark. He grew up, learned how to talk to people, and how to drink. He had to stay happy, didn't he? Who was he if he wasn't Happy Mac?

McCurchy's promise was not a Texas mirage. Before the two years were up, Happy Mac had it made. He was in big time; he was making money. There was no reason not to be happy.

But one night when he was in his early twenties, a telegram was delivered to his dressing room door. "Mother very low. Come immediately if you expect to see her alive. Love, Dad."

Suddenly his whole world turned gray. The thought tore at him: "I've come up too fast. Lived too much. It's the way I've changed. That's what's killing her."

Three days later he stood unsteadily in the doorway of her bedroom. Yet it was liquor that had given him courage to be there at all. He was convinced that her sickness was all his fault. Swaying toward the bed, he crumpled up in a chair.

She turned to him weakly. "You're not going back there, are you, Walter?"

"Mom, listen to me. I know I've been drinking, but I mean this from the bottom of my heart. If GOD will let you get well, I'll never go back to show business. Much as I love it. So help me, Mom. I won't go back."

He told the doctor the same thing. But the doctor shook his head. "If that woman is alive ten days from now, Walter, it'll be a miracle."

But Walter meant what he had vowed. When his mother rallied, he repeated the promise. Dancing wasn't everything in life. What went with it wasn't good. He would quit The Business and make a new man of himself - for his mother's sake.

The morning his mother was strong enough to cook breakfast for the family, Happy went downtown to celebrate. He stayed all day. After a few drinks, he began telling everyone he met what had happened. "GOD spared my little mother's life. She was supposed to be dead in ten days. But what do you think? She cooked my breakfast this morning." Later, he remembered saying that to dozens of people but he didn't remember how he got home that night.

The next morning, he shuffled into the kitchen. Slumping down at the table, he said, "Think a change in environment will help me, Mom." He couldn't look at her. "I meant it to work, though. You know I did. I'm no common drunk, you know. I want to change my ways. But I can't stay here. It won't work if I do."

He ground a spoon into the tablecloth. "I'll - I'll come back one of these days. Don't worry your pretty little head."

He blamed it all on those restless feet. At the depot, he bought a one-way ticket to Chicago, staying sober until he got there. What he had told his mother about changing was more than passing fright or guilt. He meant it enough to leave the theater, enough even to silence those tapping feet of his.

Honest with himself about the temptations of show business, Happy went to work in Chicago's Loop as a window trimmer in a big stationery store. There he stayed for two years. Some of the time he was sober; often he wasn't. But he held onto his job. And he was almost happy.

One day he was working in the big south window of the store on Clark Street when he heard a knock on the outside of the huge plate glass. Somebody was waving to him to come on out and talk. It was John McCurchy.

"You coulda knocked me over with the proverbial feather, Happy, when I saw you trimming windows. Trimming windows! Man, you're the Happy Boy. What you hiding from?"

Happy tried to shrug it off. "In a show window? Hiding?" John McCurchy pulled out a cigar, biting off the tip with force. "All right. But they still don't see you. They don't see the happy guy. All they see is some yokel laying out birthday cards."

"You want me to give 'em a fast off-to-Buffalo in the window?" Lighting his cigar, John fished out one for Happy.

"Forget the window," he said, contemptuously blowing his smoke over at the plate glass. "I've got five acts scheduled on the south side of Chicago and only four have shows. You're just like found money, boy! Let's go."

He went - out of the stationery store window, down to Chicago's south side, and up into big-time vaudeville. Those happy feet hadn't forgotten. They remembered how the boards felt under thin leather. They remembered how to answer the music and the crowd out there. They were happy feet again and they went on dancing right to the top. In the next nine years, there were a lot of laughs, plenty of money, too much liquor.

In 1925, when Happy was on top, he came back to Chicago for a new show, taking temporary lodgings with a nice couple waiting for their first baby. To be a good fellow, Happy offered to wait it out in the hospital for the father, who couldn't get off work.

Smoking impatiently in the hospital sunroom, trying to shake off a hangover, he regretted his generosity. As he sat there brooding over the fact that the hospital ought to furnish him some simple remedy for his malady, just as payment for his kindness, the sunroom door opened. A nurse, looking like all the advertisements for nursing schools he had ever seen, walked in.

"Are you as unhappy as you look?" she asked him. "Unhappy, me? That's a laugh."

"Why?"

"Because my name's Happy, that's why."

"Then I'd say you're kidding yourself."

He asked himself why beautiful women have to speak. "Look, nurse, since you've been so kind, could you get me about six aspirin tablets."

"Well, two anyway." She smiled. "I think I can show you how to find something that will cure your condition permanently."

With a shaky hand, he straightened his tie. He was pleased at her womanly concern for his troubles. "A cure? If you recommend it, my dear, it must be delightful stuff. Where do I find it?"

Before the aspirin eased the throbbing head and before his friends' baby was born, Happy made a date to meet the nurse on the Lincoln and Wrightwood "el" platform that night. He maintained his interest in the cure she kept hinting at. He was sure of two things, however: this was all a come-on, and he had tried and discarded more hangover cures than she'd read about.

So they met that night and started off together. He noticed her feet moved in a lilting pattern - small steps, with a bounce now and then, very feminine. He smiled to himself when she said she wanted to take him some place special. Then suddenly on State Street, she stopped.

"Here?" he asked, looking around in dismay. "Here, Mr. MacDonald."

"Why - this is a Skid Row mission. With drunken bums off the street."

She turned from him slightly. "I come here often to help out. Are you going in with me or not?"

Happy moved uneasily. His feet could get him to the bar on the corner in half a minute. "You're too beautiful to put a man in such a ghastly position, my dear. I . . ."

"Are you coming in?"

In spite of her beauty, the girl was clearly a religious fanatic.

"Uh - yes," he heard himself say. "Right behind you, Birdie."

Happy followed Birdie Schultz inside the chapel door of the Pacific Garden Mission. Then he saw the rows of unshaven bums. Sickened, he turned away. After getting out fast, he didn't stop until he reached the nearest bar, one block south.

There he bought a large bottle of gin and headed back for his room with it. Until latter that night he sat alone, drinking and thinking about the strange unexpected day. A lovely female! Those filthy bums! Why would a woman like that . . .?

The next afternoon, he had a phone call. "I noticed you skipped out on me last night," Birdie Schultz began calmly.

"What a horrible place! What dreadful people, Birdie! Really, my dear, a young lady of your refinement should not . . ."

She interrupted. "Are you working at the theater tonight?" "Certainly, my dear. I'm a very hard-working man." He stalled, to keep her talking. "A slave to my public, you might say."

"I want you to go back to the Mission with me, Mr. MacDonald."

He wanted to see her again, today - anywhere. So he agreed to meet her at quarter of ten, after his show, at the mission.

"Don't be late," she said. "I don't want you to miss the invitation. Good-by."

"Wait a minute. Invitation to what?"

But she had hung up. He improvised a carefree boy-meets-girl-in-the-spring step over to the window. Invitation to doughnuts and coffee with the elite of Skid Row - what else? Such an attractive creature to take religion so seriously! But so attractive! He would be there at quarter of ten.

The speaker that night finished with some words that sounded as if he wanted folks to step right up to the altar and meet JESUS CHRIST Himself. "Is this the invitation?" Happy whispered to Birdie.

"Yes, Happy. It's an invitation to turn your mixed-up, troubled life over to JESUS CHRIST so you can take His life. His life is a happy life and . . ."

"Me? Birdie, for the love of . . ." He turned away from her in embarrassment. There was a

warmly moist hand on his shoulder. A tall, overstuffed fellow with sweat over his puffy upper lip stood beside him. "Excuse me, are you a Christian?"

"Uh, yes, certainly," Happy tried to shrug the fellow away. "You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. Why?" "Why are you sure?"

"That's my affair, friend. Thank you anyway."

Going home, Happy spoke sharp words about religious busybodies. The next night, he was back at the Mission.

It wasn't only because of the lovely nurse, either. Happy was fair with himself. It was the music. He liked the singing at the Mission. It had a kind of beat, a happy sound. Those washed-up bums in the secondhand white shirts made the happiest music he had ever heard.

The third night, Happy arrived ahead of the invitation. He was enduring it, waiting for the singing to start again, when he saw the puffy fellow with the railroad insignia on his lapel lumber down the aisle.

The railroad man stopped and grinned down at him. "Hi ya, friend."

Happy stared back coldly. "You sure you're a Christian?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Now leave me alone."

On the way out of the mission, Birdie explained the encounter matter-of-factly. "His name is Casey Jones. He's a railroad conductor."

A Skid Row mission and a railroad guy by the name of Casey Jones haunting him!

After he left Birdie, he decided he needed a drink.

For five weeks, Happy Mac caught the streetcar to the Pacific Garden Mission after his last show. For five weeks, every night, the railroading guy named Casey Jones ambled up to him and said, "Brother, are you sure you're a Christian?"

Happy found no amusement in the fellow's aggressiveness.

Finally, he told Birdie that even though something about the old Mission had gotten through to him, he was not going to be humiliated by Casey Jones. Even if it meant he wouldn't see her again, he would not come back to the Mission.

She seemed to understand. But she convinced him to go somewhere else with her that week. It was another church, of course. But he made the date anyway.

That night after his show, he missed a streetcar, and when he met Birdie in front of the near-north-side church, he was late and irritable. The meeting had already started.

Inside, an usher whispered that only single seats were left.

After the usher seated Birdie, Happy followed him to the only other vacant seat in the vast auditorium. Sliding past two young boys, he sat down, folded his topcoat on his knees, and settled back to face the unpleasantness ahead for Birdie's sake.

Suddenly a sharp elbow jabbed him. "Fancy seeing you here, my friend." It was Casey Jones! "I want you to ask yourself one question when you listen to the sermon. Are you sure you're a Christian?"

Stiffly Happy sat weighted down by his coat, hating his seat mate, wondering how he had gotten into this situation. After the meeting, he was short with both Casey Jones and Birdie. He did not laugh about the "coincidence."

Later in his room, he told himself that this probably was no coincidence. It was all part of some hard-to-understand, harder-still-to-believe timing. He knew that he had reached the place where he could no longer face himself. Unless he stayed in the heady, unreal world of the theater, he might crumble into little dusty pieces.

The glamorous, clamorous laughter that filled the theater when Happy performed was his life. This laughter of the great big wonderful audience out there had become his god. It was really the only god he wanted. It was his life!

He remembered his mother and all his broken promises. Somebody was singing a song in the next apartment, and his feet began tapping the beat. He got up and poured himself a drink. The theater and everything that went with it was his life. There was no doubt about that.

But he was not quite through with the mission. He decided to go back - once more. As he walked in, the superintendent, Pa Taylor, was reading in his penetrating, gentle voice.

"Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh."

Why do the heathen imagine a vain thing?

Something broke inside the unhappy little dancehall comedian. All his life he had been imagining a vain thing. All his life he had been living a vain thing. Living to make people laugh, to give them some kind of temporary respite from looking at their own twisted lives.

He sat there in back of a row of scrubbed-up derelicts with frayed-collar shirts. In front, he could see the back of Casey Jones' bald head. Over and over, he repeated to himself. "I've imagined a vain thing. My whole life - a vain thing. GOD help me, right now."

Later, Happy Mac listened to the good news that He that sitteth in the heavens had done

something very wonderful for all men, and for Happy. He had sent His only Son to earth to give Himself for Happy's sake - to be comedian Walter MacDonald's Saviour!

On May 29, 1925, there at the Pacific Garden Mission, Happy Mac found a peace and joy that did not need to be manufactured by skillful timing and trick routines. He found the only way to be truly happy when he decided at last to belong to JESUS CHRIST forever.

Today, Evangelist Walter MacDonald's feet beat a happy rhythm as they pace a church pulpit in New York City, or one in Kentucky, or in California. For his feet keep rhythm with the words born out of his soul's real joy, as he invites men and women to come to JESUS CHRIST and find the only real happiness in GOD's world.

~ end of chapter 1 ~
